



Sore throat

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Introduction

The medical term for a sore throat is pharyngitis, which refers to inflammation of the pharynx. Sore throat is typically caused by a bacterial or viral infection. Sore throat caused by infection usually lasts between three and seven days and then clears without complications.

What can cause a sore throat?

Viruses, especially those causing upper respiratory infections (such as the common cold viruses) are the most common cause of a sore throat. Bacterial infection with Group A Streptococcus is the most common cause of bacterial pharyngitis/tonsillitis and is known as a "strep throat".

Examples of non-infectious sore throats include:

- Traumatic injury i.e. hot liquids or a foreign body injury
- Exposure to irritants i.e. caustic agents or chemicals and inhaled toxic gases
- Allergies or an allergic reaction
- Dryness

Treatment

Fast and effective pain relief for a sore throat can be obtained with the use of over-the-counter pain medication such as paracetamol or a nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory agent such as ibuprofen or naproxen. There is a possible association between aspirin usage and Reye's syndrome and the use of aspirin should therefore be avoided in children (under the age of 16 years).

Treatment for a sore throat related to a viral infection such as a common cold, is aimed at relieving symptoms. Viral infections should not be treated with antibiotics. Antibiotic treatment is reserved for sore throat infection caused by bacterial infections such as Strep throat where antibiotics help to prevent the spread of infection and complications such as acute rheumatic fever.

Topical therapies

- Topical analgesics such as anaesthetics or anti-inflammatories provide symptomatic relief of superficial discomfort.
 - Anaesthetics included in mouth and throat products include lidocaine (lignocaine), dibucaine and benzocaine. Local anaesthetics have a numbing effect which helps to ease pain.
 - Flurbiprofen is an anti-inflammatory approved to treat sore throat in adults and children over the age of 12 years.
 - Benzylamine has anaesthetic, pain-relieving and anti-inflammatory activity.
 - Menthol is sometimes included for its cooling and anaesthetic effect.
- Antiseptics and disinfectants are used for the treatment of minor or superficial infections.
 - Examples include cetylpyridinium chloride, chlorhexidine gluconate, dequalinium chloride and dichlorobenzyl alcohol in combination with amylmetacresol.
 - Phenol is an antiseptic and disinfectant agent and also has a local anaesthetic effect.

Some topical therapies may contain more than one ingredient i.e. a local anaesthetic or analgesic combined with an antiseptic.

Additional advice

In addition to treatment with topical medicines, patients can be advised to:

- Sip warm beverages such as honey-or lemon tea or chicken soup

- Drink cold beverages
- Eat frozen or cold desserts such as ice cream or ice lollies
- Use warm salt water as a mouthwash or gargle

Choosing the correct topical therapy

The effect of lozenges may persist for longer in the throat than gargles or sprays. In addition, lozenges also have a moisturising and soothing effect and may relieve dryness in the mouth and throat.

One study suggests that oral sprays may be more useful in the treatment of conditions affecting the back of the throat and oral rinses for conditions affecting the tongue and oral cavities (mouth).

Some products used for the treatment of a sore throat may not be suitable for children. In addition to the package insert recommendations, the following should be taken into consideration when recommending treatment for children:

- Lozenges pose a choking hazard in young children and should best be avoided in children younger than three to four years of age.
- Throat sprays should only be used in children six years of age and older.
- Patients younger than 12 years of age may struggle to gargle and rinse without swallowing. It is therefore best not to use these products in children younger than 12 years of age.

“Throat sprays should only be used in children six years of age and older.”

When to refer the patient

Although over-the-counter pain medication can be used to alleviate pain associated with sore throat, it is important to know when to treat symptoms and when to seek medical

attention. Patients with an underlying chronic illness or taking medication that may impair their immune system should seek medical attention if they have a sore throat.

In addition, if any of the following symptoms occur with a sore throat, the patient should be advised to immediately seek medical attention:

- Breathing problems
- Rash
- Drooling because he/she cannot swallow
- Struggle to open the mouth
- Swelling of the tongue or neck or
- A stiff neck

Conclusion

Treatments for a sore throat include rest, adequate fluid intake and the use of pain medication, oral rinses (gargles), sprays and lozenges. In addition, since a sore throat is typically caused by infection, patients should be advised to adopt a healthy lifestyle, e.g. hand washing, cough etiquette and other good hygiene methods in order to help prevent the spread of infection.

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